Chapter 3

Summary of the Planning Process

Before passage of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) in 1991, transportation planning and investment decisions were focused on national transportation priorities that favored automobile travel, such as the completion of the Interstate system. In recent years, transportation planners have shifted emphasis to address more State and local concerns, including alternatives to the car. Planners have started to obtain more input from local users. Projects planned with local citizen involvement have led to the development of transportation facilities that better meet the needs of local users, including underserved communities such as minorities and people with disabilities. These projects have also tended to encourage more pedestrian use. Federal, State, and regional transportation agencies now routinely assess both the positive and negative impacts of a planned project by holding community meetings, distributing surveys, and interviewing individuals from a wide variety of user groups.

3.1 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act and Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century

The 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act directed Federal transportation policy to construct "an extensive network of roads across America" (DiStefano and Raimi, 1996), including the 42,000-mile Interstate highway system. For the next 35 years, most Federal and State transportation plans and funding focused on this primary task. In 1991, with the system almost complete, Congress shifted the focus of national transportation policy to the efficient movement of people and goods. As part of this shift, Congress gave States and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) greater flexibility to use their transportation funds on State and local priorities as part of an enhanced transportation planning process that ensured the involvement of all affected agencies, as well as the community.

ISTEA placed a greater focus on the concepts of intermodalism and multimodalism, increased funding opportunities for transportation projects promoting alternatives to the automobile, and emphasized the importance of involving the community in the planning process. After the enactment of ISTEA, the US DOT undertook a major effort to develop a national policy to promote bicycling and walking as viable transportation options. This work is published in The National Bicycling and Walking Study — Transportation Choices for a Changing America (1994). The study established goals to double the number of walking and bicycling trips and to reduce traffic injuries and crashes affecting pedestrians and bicyclists. Ongoing strategies were developed for Federal, State, and local governments to improve bicycling and walking conditions. The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), signed into law on June 9, 1998, builds on the many changes made by ISTEA.

3.2 Building a Multi- and Intermodal System

A multimodal transportation system allows people to choose to walk, bicycle, use transit, or drive according to the type of trip they wish to make. Short trips can be made by foot or bicycle, while transit and driving options exist for longer trips or those involving heavy loads. Such a system helps promote choice, ensures equitable access to transportation, and reduces societal reliance on a single mode of transportation. Creating such a multimodal system challenges planners and decision makers to create innovative

solutions to current transportation problems. These strategies, such as telecommuting and ridesharing, can go beyond traditional infrastructure investments.

A multimodal system must also be intermodal. Intermodalism integrates all forms of transportation, such as highways, public transit systems, sidewalks, and bicycle facilities, into one seamless system. In an intermodal system, two or more distinct modes of travel are coordinated so that people can reach their destinations by transferring quickly and easily from one mode to the next. For example, for a public transit system to be a viable transportation alternative, it must provide frequent connections to an extensive network of accessible sidewalks and shared-use paths.

The trend toward more integrated, multimodal transportation systems has improved transportation options for people with disabilities, especially those who do not drive automobiles. The additional requirement that all new construction must comply with the ADA to the fullest extent possible has brought about an overall increase in the number of accessible pedestrian and public transit facilities.

3.3 Federal Transportation Funding Opportunities

Since ISTEA was passed, budgets for pedestrian facilities have increased dramatically. Projects improving walking opportunities are eligible for all major Federal highway funding categories. Furthermore, TEA-21 clarifies that projects intended for the "modification of sidewalks to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990" are eligible for Surface Transportation Program funds, the biggest single source of transportation funding for States in the legislation (TEA-21, 1998). Other categories include the National Highway System (NHS) funding program, which may be used to build sidewalks and trails as integral parts of major highways, including Interstate corridors; the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement (CMAQ) program, which may be used to make improvements to curb ramps, sidewalks, and intersections; and the Recreational Trails Program, which may be used to sponsor accessible off-road trail opportunities and improvements.

In recent years, the biggest source of funds for pedestrian and bicycle improvements has been the Transportation Enhancements program, which requires States to spend 10 percent of their Surface Transportation Program funds on a specific list of eligible projects. This list includes the development of pedestrian and bicycle facilities and the conversion of abandoned railroad corridors to trails. More than half of the funds available under this program have been used for these two activities. Pedestrian projects designed to improve the accessibility of a sidewalk or trail are also eligible for transportation enhancement funding.

Most States have appointed a transportation enhancement coordinator to oversee the management of these funds. States typically invite applications for enhancement funding each year and appoint a committee to select the projects that will be funded.

TEA-21 created two new funding opportunities for pedestrian and bicycle projects. The law established a Transit Enhancement Program that is similar to the Transportation Enhancement Program. One percent of the funds for urban transit projects is set aside for a prescribed list of activities that include "pedestrian access and walkways. . . and enhanced access for people with disabilities to mass transportation" (TEA-21, 1998). TEA-21 also made pedestrian, bicycling, and traffic calming measures eligible for Hazard Elimination Program funds. This program was designed to improve the safety of locations that present a danger to pedestrians, bicyclists, and motorists.

Like the Transportation Enhancement Program, this program consists of 10 percent of a State's Surface Transportation Program funds.

Transportation projects using Federal funds must be included in an approved transportation plan developed by a State or Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO). Most federally funded pedestrian and bicycle projects require a certain level of matching State or local dollars, and a State or local agency must assume responsibility for maintaining facilities built with these funds.

3.4 Planning under Federal Transportation Legislation

States and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (planning agencies established for each urbanized area of more than 50,000 population) are required to develop a transportation plan that provides for the development, integrated management, and operation of transportation systems and facilities, including pedestrian walkways and bicycle transportation facilities. Both statewide and MPO plans include projects and strategies that increase the safety and security of the transportation system for nonmotorized users.

States and MPOs are required to develop two types of transportation planning documents: a long-range plan with a 20-year horizon, and a Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) listing proposed projects to be completed over the next 3 years with Federal funding. Projects that appear in the TIP should be consistent with, or drawn from, the long-range plan. Both documents must be developed with significant public input and updated at least every 3 years.

Federal transportation legislation further requires that the needs of pedestrians and bicyclists be considered in these planning documents. TEA-21 specifies that "bicycle transportation facilities and pedestrian walkways shall be considered, where appropriate, in conjunction with all new construction and reconstruction of transportation facilities, except where bicycle and pedestrian use are not permitted" (TEA-21, 1998). Transportation plans and projects must also provide due consideration of safe and contiguous pedestrian and bicycle routes. These safety considerations should include "the installation, where appropriate, and maintenance of audible traffic signals and audible signs at street crossings" (TEA-21, 1998).

Involvement in the planning process is critical to improving the transportation system for people with disabilities. States and MPOs are required to provide citizens, affected public agencies, and other interested parties with a reasonable opportunity to comment on the long-range plans and TIPs before they are approved; many agencies go further than this by including users and user groups on project selection committees and advisory boards.

During the development of the long-range plans and the TIPs, citizens can request funding for sidewalk and trail projects. Each revision and update to these documents is an opportunity to protect existing projects or promote new pedestrian improvements. Opportunities to affect the design and implementation of the project to benefit sidewalk users may continue to occur even after a project has been approved. As a result, interest groups must remain engaged throughout the planning process to ensure the usability of final designs.

3.5 Transportation Agencies

Various Federal, State, and local government agencies are responsible for developing and maintaining transportation networks that link cities and towns. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) provides funding and technical assistance to States developing their transportation systems. Each State has a department of

transportation (DOT) that plans, designs, and maintains State roadway systems and other transportation. Jurisdiction over roadways and funding processes varies greatly from State to State.

Urbanized areas with populations larger than 50,000 have regional planning agencies, or MPOs, that are responsible for transportation planning and policy within their areas. Some MPOs also conduct other types of regional planning. MPOs and State DOTs should collaborate closely with each other, local transportation agencies, and community residents during the planning process.

3.6 Land Management Agencies

Land management agencies include Federal entities such as the USDA Forest Service, the USDI Bureau of Land Management, the USDI National Park Service, and the USDI Fish and Wildlife Service, as well as State and local entities responsible for parks, forests, or other public lands. Typically, such agencies have jurisdiction over tracts of land encompassing urban to wilderness environments. Like their civic counterparts, Federal land management agencies often delegate decisions to their regional and local divisions. Land management agencies are responsible for transportation planning within their own jurisdictions. However, if a land management agency uses Federal highway funding for its transportation projects, it must follow a planning process similar to that of the State DOT, which includes coordinating with appropriate State and local planning agencies. Although land management agencies construct some sidewalks, they are more likely to be involved in constructing trails.

3.7 Pedestrian/Bicycle Coordinators

Each State DOT is required to have a pedestrian/bicycle coordinator position. In most States, this position is full time with sufficient authority to make pedestrian and bicycling issues a priority with other agencies, State offices, and divisions within the State DOT. Duties of the coordinator may include the following (Associate Administrator for Program Development, Federal Highway Administration, 1992):

- Planning and managing new nonmotorized facilities and programs
- Creating safety and promotional information for the public
- Helping to develop State and MPO pedestrian and bicycle facility plans
- Serving as the principal liaison among Federal, State, and local agencies and the press, citizen organizations, and individuals on bicycling and walking issues

3.8 Other Transportation Planning Participants

Federal legislation requires transportation agencies to engage the public throughout the planning process. The "public" consists of a diverse web of people whose varied activities and presence make up the fabric of a community. The following are segments of the public that are involved in the planning process:

Individual citizens — members of the community unaffiliated with advocacy groups

Citizens' groups — citizen-organized volunteer groups, including neighborhood organizations and business coalitions

Advocacy groups — grassroots organizations dedicated to representing the needs of a particular interest group, such as people with disabilities

Land developers — professionals who are not part of a State or local agency employed in the real estate, construction, or development industry

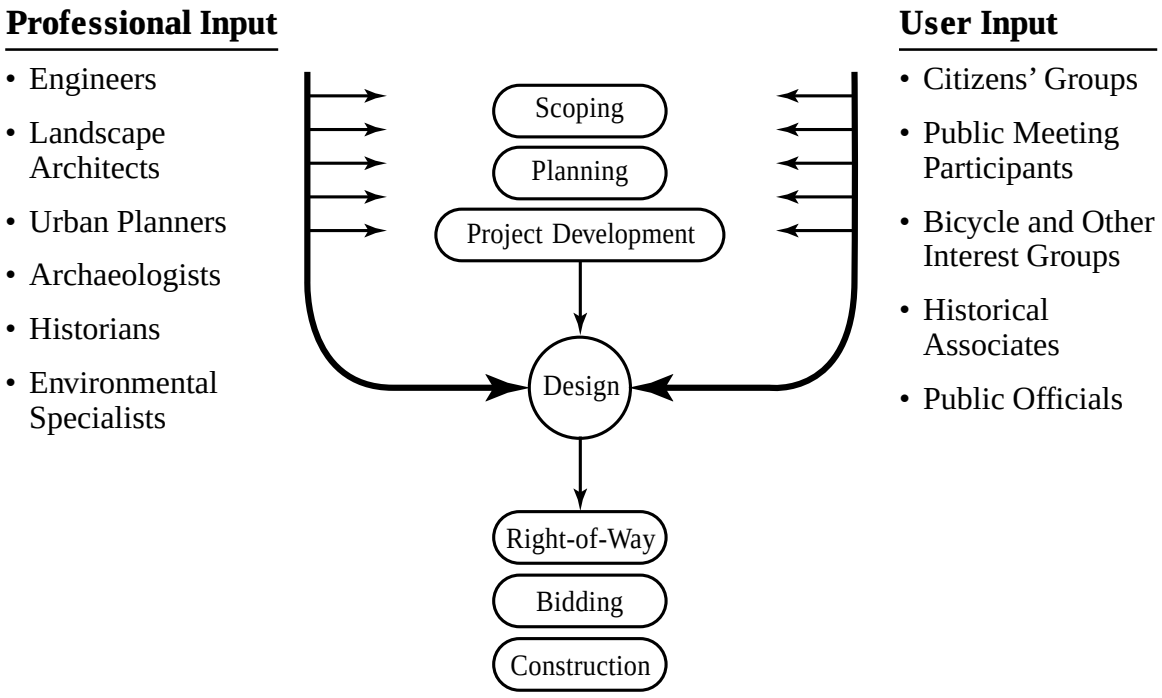

Figure 3-1: Sources of input during the project development process (based on FHWA, 1997a).

Advisory committees — groups convened by agencies to provide planning advice

Elected local officials — people who represent the public interest and are responsible to a geographically close but often highly diverse constituency. Elected officials such as city council members and legislative representatives serve as repositories for the opinions of a wide cross-section of the public.

Although citizens are not directly responsible for construction of public sidewalks and trails, they imbue the planning process with a unique local perspective. For example, a resident might know of a better location for a playground or sidewalk than a regional planner less familiar with the area. Citizens who travel around their communities are often best qualified to identify when the transportation network breaks down and where problems exist. Ideally, the public involvement process will result in decisions that best reflect the community's mobility and accessibility needs. Public involvement should pervade all aspects of the overall project development process, including the choice of priorities and investment decisions, as shown in Figure 3-1 (FHWA and FTA, 1995).

3.9 Strategies for Public Involvement

ISTEA's increased acknowledgment of public involvement became the impetus for the development of more innovative and friendly public involvement strategies. While past public involvement efforts have emphasized "telling" or "selling" something to the public, the operative phrase is now "consulting with" the public (US DOT, 1995c). According to Siwek and Associates (1996), "users, transportation providers, and the public should be given sufficient opportunity to provide input to the plan's development, not just to comment on a draft final project."

Transportation agencies need to implement effective procedures for involving the public. The public involvement technique selected depends on the results the agency wants to achieve, but techniques used should always involve the full range of users. For example,

an MPO may elect to use surveys in the early stages of planning, while relying on the input of an advisory committee for more in-depth planning discussions, such as those of a corridor master planning process.

It is important to provide opportunities for all segments of the community to participate in the planning process. Proactive outreach techniques are effective ways to consult with underserved communities, such as people with disabilities. Inviting the clients of retirement homes, Veterans Administration offices, and independent living facilities to a public planning meeting is a more productive strategy for obtaining input from people with disabilities than merely announcing the meeting in the local newspaper. In addition, holding planning meetings in venues accessible to people with disabilities should be a routine part of inviting all citizens to the planning table (US DOT, 1994c). MPOs should determine what public involvement techniques will work best given their local circumstances.

3.10 Community Impact Assessment

When a new transportation facility is built or an existing facility is significantly expanded using Federal funds, Federal environmental legislation requires agencies to conduct a community impact assessment. The assessment process alerts affected businesses and residents, as well as transportation planners and decision makers, to the potential effects of a project (Brock et al., 1996). An agency considering a project must review the potential positive and negative effects on the community and specific populations before proceeding to the construction stage. The potential impact of the project on accessibility should always be considered during the community impact assessment.

The information obtained during the community assessment process should be used to develop better projects and limit negative side effects. Perceived negative impacts can be overcome by involving the public from the start of the planning process. Agencies should be aware that mitigating the effects of one impact might create unanticipated new problems (ibid.). For example, the disturbance involved in rerouting a road through a residential neighborhood to avoid demolishing a historic downtown area might anger home owners.

3.11 Conclusion

ISTEA signaled a dramatic change in national transportation policy. It increased community involvement in the planning process, expanded intermodal transportation facilities, and broadened opportunities for funding alternatives to the automobile. TEA-21 built on the foundation of ISTEA, and together, these two instrumental pieces of legislation have led to the development of a more comprehensive, locally determined, and flexible transportation system. The increased availability of pedestrian and bicycle facilities, combined with better outreach policies, will lead to more accessible communities.